ARCHAEOLOGY PAPERS

ARCHAEOLOGY BRANCH

Department of Aboriginal and Islanders Advancement

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HUTS AND SHELTERS

archaeology branch

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NO. 18

HUTS AND SHELTERS

Prepared from information contained in Walter E. Roth 'letin No. 16
Records of the Australian Museum VIII, 1, 1910.

Throughout Australia the Aboriginal way of life differed from being one of an almost sedentary nature to the fairly constant mobility of the people of Central Australia and the north. No where in Queensland have we found the remains of stone shelters that are a feature of Victorian Aboriginal Archaeology, however, the Queensland shelters varied from one part of the State to another dependant upon the climate and the need for protection from the elements.

If one looks at the work done by D.F. Thomson[1] at Aurukun, one gains an understanding of the pattern of daily and annual life in the far north, influenced as it was by climatic conditions and seasonal variations in Flora and Fauna.

Thomson writes of the differing camp styles and localities utilised during the various seasons. During the wet season camp sites were located in areas above flood level and the diet and material culture of the people differed to that of the dry season. The table at the end of this article has been taken from D.J. Thomson's article 'The Seasonal Factor in Human Culture' and it has been presented in a somewhat abridged form.

As Thomson has pointed out, if an Archaeologist or Anthropologist studied these people in different seasons it would be possible for them to imagine that they were looking at two different cultures.

Consequently, when we are endeavouring to interpret the archaeological record it must be borne in mind that seasonal variations produced a number of changes in the lifestyle and material culture of the people.

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From W.E. Roth's work we can gain a view of the different types of architectural styles utilised by Aborigines in constructing huts and shelters.

Throughout Queensland wind breaks and very temporary shelters would have been made for an overnight stop. Simple bark shelters were also constructed for short-term stays. (Fig. 1).

More sophisticated shelters were constructed of forked and bent saplings or hoops, interlaced and covered with grass, leaves, bark or palm leaves.

[1] Thomson D.F. 'The Seasonal Factor in Human Culture' in 'Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society' Vol. 5, No. 10, 1939.

Roth comments that independently of the protection provided by natural overhanging bushes and caves, the most primitive form of artificial windbreak was seen on the Wellesley Islands. They were composed of bundles of grass, leaves and boughs of trees. They were thrown on the ground and arranged to form a semi-circular hedge. Roth also reports similar windbreaks throughout the western areas of the State south to Boulia. Remains of more complicated shelters in the south-west area can still be seen today. (Plate I).

In the north-east along the Tully River and further north to the tip of Cape York, shelters were constructed by making a frame from pliable cane or branches and the frame was tied with lawyer-cane. (Plate II). This frame was then thatched with grass, leaves or bark. The grass that was used is the commonly known "blady grass" which grows to 2 or 3 feet in length. Handsful of it with the root end down were laid against the framework all the way round the base. Then followed another layer with the roots pointing upwards. These bundles were then fixed in position with split cane which was fixed to one side of the doorway and passed around the hut and to be tied finally to the other side of the doorway. This held the grasses in place. Successive layers were similarly placed and fixed to make the hut waterproof. On the top of the shelter ti-tree bark or palm leaves were laid with boughs resting on top to keep them in position.

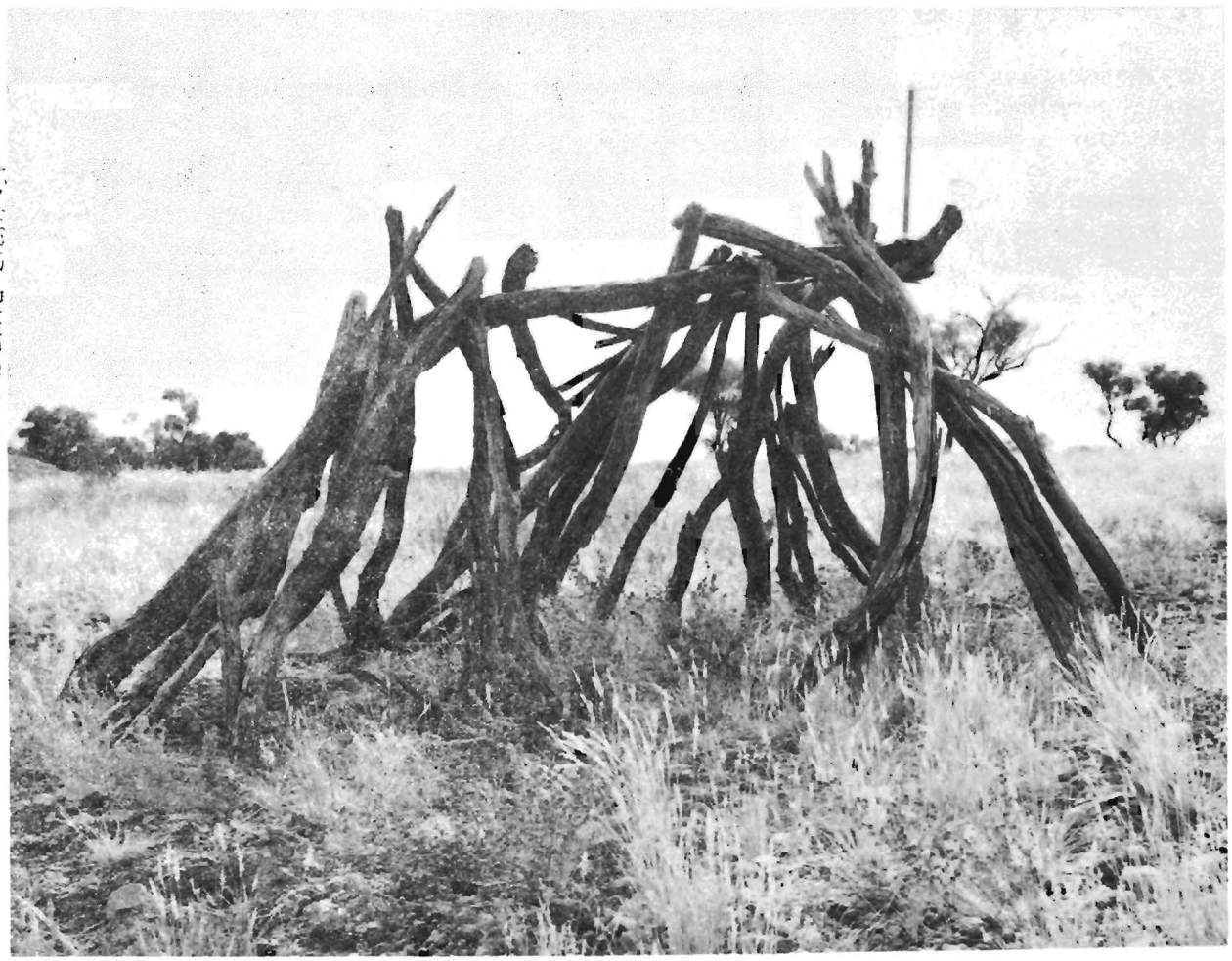

PLATE I: Remains of Gunyah, South West Queensland.

Simple bark huts were made, either with single sheets of bark or overlapping sheets of bark, which were bent over a ridge pole to form a V-shaped shelter. (Fig. 1).

Around Cape Bedford a similar technique was used although the long pliable branches are simply bent in 180° arches across each other and then thatched with bark.

In the Brisbane area, information that Roth obtained from Petrie concerning huts made by women at Eagle Farm, Bribie and Moreton Islands indicates that the huts were large, being about 9 feet wide and 4 feet high.

They were constructed of a series of 4 hoops crossed with both ends stuck into the ground. The timber used was the local wattle. (Fig. 2 shows the basic framework). There was no interweaving and the framework was covered with sheets of ti-tree bark placed transversely and made to overlap, like a tiled roof. These huts were mainly used in the winter-time, with a small fire or in the centre of the shelter.

Plate II: Atherton Area. (Photo - Oxley Library).

In the Princess Charlotte Bay area and across the Peninsular towards the Pennefather River the domed framework was still used with a special hoop for the doorway. (Figs. 2 - 6 show the types of frameworks constructed). Cabbage palm leaves were then used to thatch the shelter and they were kept in place by logs of wood.

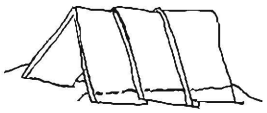

Fig. 1 - Simple bark shelter.

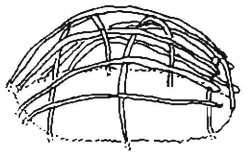

Fig. 2 - Hut framework.

Fig. 3.- Circular hut covered with bark and grass.

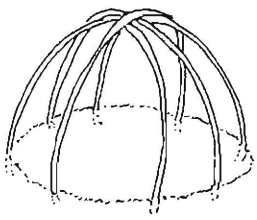

Fig. 4

Fig. 6

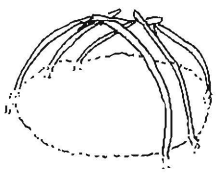

Fig. 5

Figs. 4 - 6 - Different methods of constructing framework.

Around Rockhampton, Brisbane and Gladstone forked sticks were used to create a tripod effect against which the straight branches to form the back of the shelter were laid. (Figs. 7 and 8 show the type of construction which was covered with bark or grass). To keep the bark in position a trench was dug around the back and earth thrown up against the bark all the way round. Roth comments that the large door or opening of the shelter was always facing in the direction from which the people had come and its position had nothing to do with the prevailing winds. If the wind were too strong, a wind break would be placed in front of the shelter.

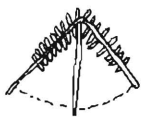

Fig. 7 - Straight branches from back of shelter.

Fig. 8 - Framework of Fig. 7 covered with bark.

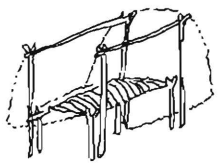

Fig. 9 - Sleeping platform.

In the north-west districts and south to Boulia domed-framed huts were also constructed. Two naturally bent forked saplings were fixed deeply into the ground and made to interlock above. Up against these two central supports smaller branches were laid and then grasses heavily laid over the top to form a circular shelter with a wide open mouth. If the rain beat in at the doorway, the opening to the shelter was covered in with an armful of bushes.

PLATE III: Shelters, Keppel Island. (Photo - Oxley Library).

The use of bark in the western area and south to Boulia was uncommon largely due to the fact that suitable trees were not available. Grasses and leafy branches were used instead with the grasses being kept in place by heavy boughs. (Plate IV).

Often in south-western areas the shelters were scooped out before being constructed to create more warmth, particularly for the cold winters in that area.

A flat bottom hole was dug into the ground to a depth of about 1½ feet and the framework of the shelter was inserted. Wet grass was then collected and wedged into the spaces between the framework and the floor. Mixed with mud, the wet grass became hardened and fixed. A ring of wet mud about a foot in width was often smeared around the limits of the entrance forming a type of artificial doorframe.

A large fire was then lit within the shelter opposite the door and by sundown when the embers were removed the place was warm enough to sleep in. Even today the scooped out shelters can still be seen.

PLATE IV: Shelter - Birdsville. (Photo - Oxley Library).

With the introduction of clothing, Roth noticed a gradual change in the construction of these shelters. The depth of the floor below ground surface slowly decreased, while the height of the hut above the ground correspondingly increased.

In many parts of the Cape York area shelters were made by placing a large sheet of bark across a central ridge pole or across two ridge poles.

Often also sleeping platforms were constructed beside which a fire was lit and the smoke tended to keep away the incessant mosquitoes. The platform was built to be approximately 5 or 6 feet high and could often accomodate 3 or 4 people. Largely the platforms were used by the men, the women having to be content with the ground as it was their job to look after the fire. The sketch shows the nature of these sleeping platforms. (Fig. 9).

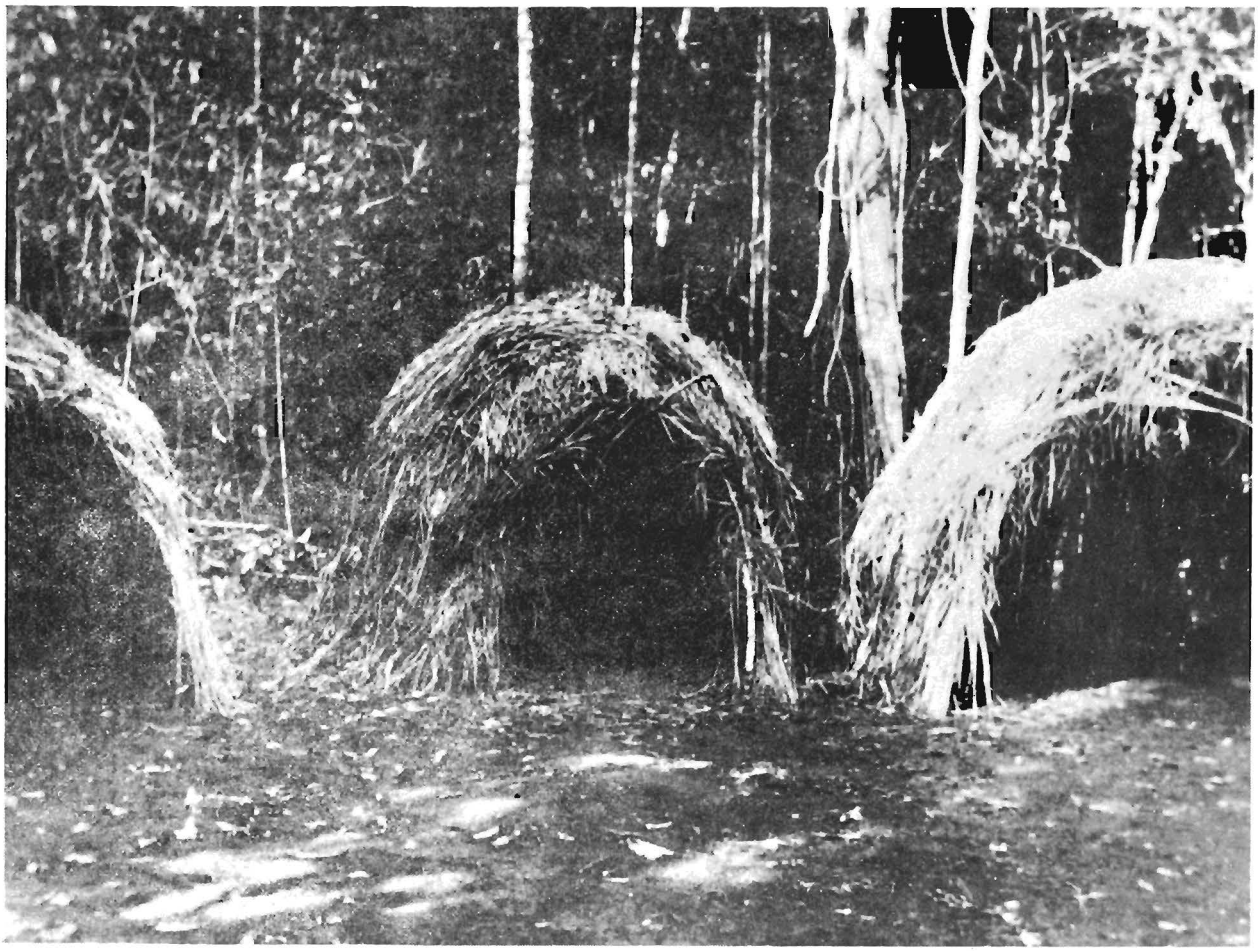

PLATE V: Atherton Tableland. (Photo - Oxley Library).

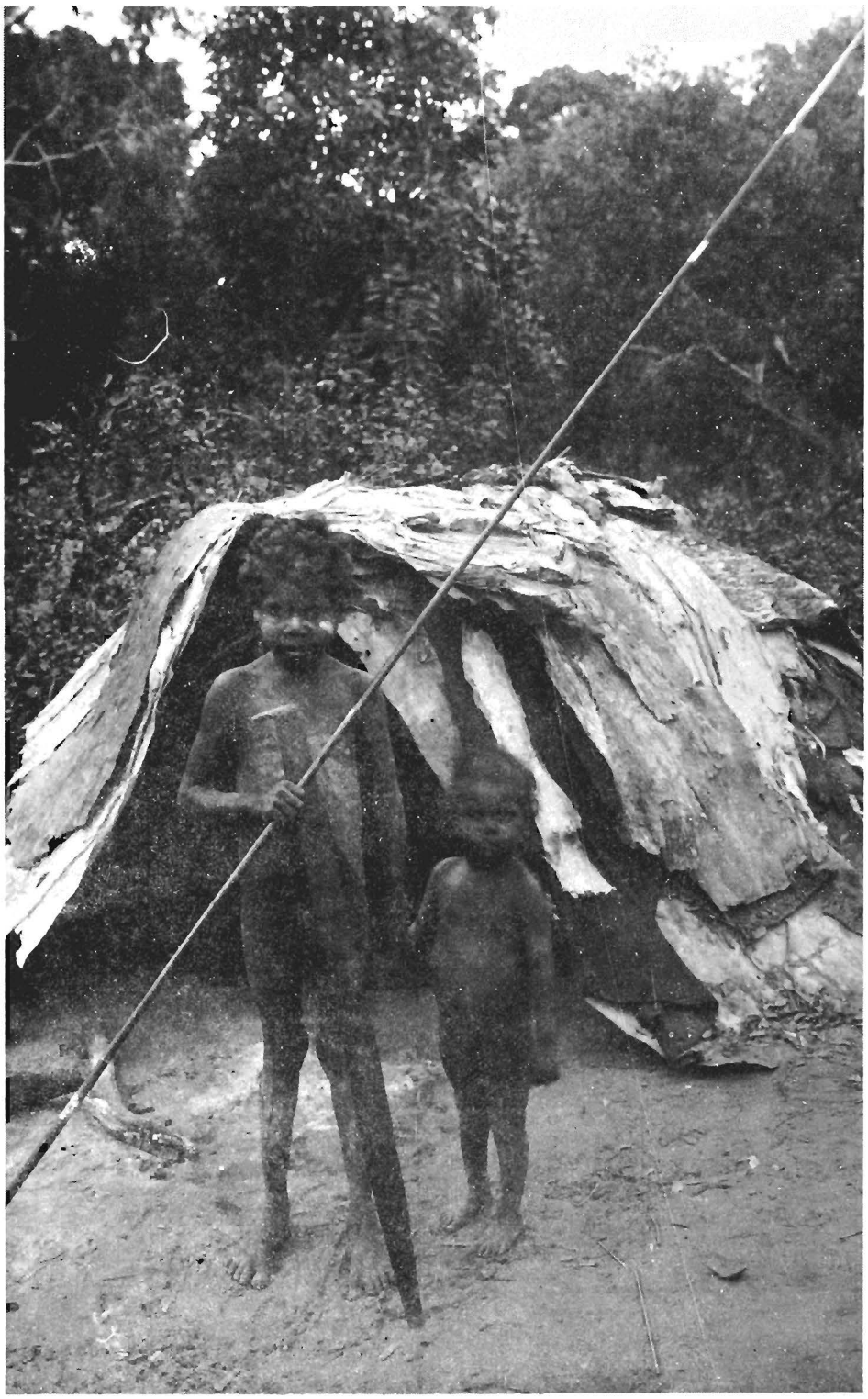

PLATE VI: Cooktown area. (Photo - Oxley Library).

Table adapted from Thomson Donald F. 'The Seasonal Factor in Human Culture'. Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society, Vol. 5, 1939, pp. 209-221

Calendar Month	Seasonal Characteristics	Activities	Living Sites	House types	Foods	
mid March to late July	Beginning of Dry Season S.E. Winds, Cooler. Still alot of surface water Travel difficult Mosquitoes Bark Canoes used.	Open ground camps set up. Fish traps built Large camps break up and nomadic movement starts as water recedes.	Open area camps i.e. windy beaches, raised dunes, well drained sites (away from mosquitoes).	Sleeping platform wind break on beaches, circular bark huts as weather gets cooler.	Fish. Vegetables abundant (mangrove, yam, lily, seeds, roots).	ONTJIN
late July to early October	Dry Season. Cool at first then becoming warmer. Water courses dry up.	Small groups. Nomadic in search for water and food Vegetables become difficult to find. Fish netting Grass burning to drive game.	Temporary camps occupied for few days only	Circular enclosed bark huts against cold and wind. Later open airy shelters against sun.	Some vegetables early on. Yams. Honey. Mammals.	KATYIM
October November December	Hot. Wind from N.W. Water courses dry. Water only in deep wells. Lightening - approach of wet season.	Less nomadic. Large scale burning of grass. Kangaroo etc., drives. Poisoning of fish in deep water holes. Rain making ritual.	Starting to establish camps at start of wet season, near to food supply.	Open shelters for protection against sun Wind breaks.	Vegetables scarce. Honey. Mammals. Fish.	TURRPAK
late December January February early March	Wet season Area flooded. Period of max. growth of vegetables Bark collected for canoes and houses.	Movement restricted. House and canoe building. Fishing by spears, nets. Women collect shellfish search for eggs of geese and crocodiles.	Permanent camp. Large communal camp. Communal wet season house.	Open savannah areas: sleeping platforms and small shelters. Rainforest: circular enclosed huts	No vegetables. Some fruits. Fish, shellfish, crabs. Eggs. Large marsupials.	KARP

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